

By investing in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, we're conserving wildlife and natural areas for future generations.

The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan

Story By Jeff Walk
Photos By Adele Hodde

Ask people about their favorite wildlife memory and often the answer centers on a place that's very special to them.

When I was a kid, there was a stream behind our subdivision where we built rock dams and caught crayfish and minnows.

My grandparents' farm had a brushy pasture where my cousins and I would go rabbit hunting on Thanksgiving.

Once we were camping by a lake, and just after sunrise an osprey swooped in and caught a fish.

And, too often, their memory ends with "that place is gone now" or "it's just not the same anymore."



(© Richard Day/Daybreak Imagery)

Scientists flagged about one in three of the state's mussels, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals as species in need of conservation. Illinois is at the core of the range of the red-headed woodpecker, which is still common but has declined sharply over the past 30 years.

Change is inevitable, but it's not always for the worse. In recent decades, changes to wildlife and natural areas in Illinois have been a mixed bag of short-

comings and successes. Bald eagles and river otters, once endangered, are now thriving, while pallid sturgeon and prairie-chickens barely hang on. Water quality and many fish populations have improved dramatically over the past two generations, but a quarter of our freshwater mussels are extinct or extirpated. Game animals like deer, turkey and geese are doing well, but pheasants and quail are not. The amount of forest in Illinois has nearly doubled in the past century, but in spite of efforts like the Con-



servation Reserve Program, we have less than half as much grassland as in 1950. And constantly, a dizzying barrage of new plants, animals and diseases find their way into Illinois, crowding out the native flora and fauna that make Illinois unique from



Maryland or France or Korea.

In the fall of 2005, Illinois and every other state completed a Wildlife Action Plan to consider the wildlife and places that need extra help, and to decide the most important conservation actions to take. More than 150 agencies, conservation groups and agricultural and developmental interests worked together to build the pro-active Illinois Wildlife Action Plan.

Destruction of habitat is an obvious problem, but with proper planning, development can minimize impacts and incorporate "green areas."



The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan outlines objectives for both non-game and game species and how to improve the quality of existing habitat through a variety of techniques, including prescribed burns and removal of exotic species such as purple loosestrife (above).

By identifying wildlife with declining populations or special needs, conservation will be more effective—and less controversial—than waiting until they become endangered, and difficult and costly to recover. The Action Plan outlines the specific steps to conserve wildlife and wild places that are important to so many family traditions. Making the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan successful is going to take many people and groups working together, just as they did to develop the plan. Fortunately, we agree this is worth the investment. After all, helping wildlife benefits people, too.

The lands and waters of Illinois are tremendously important natural resources for the 12 mil-

lion citizens of Illinois. Everyone needs land and water for so many things: places to live, food and drinking water, economic development, recreation and agricultural production. Hopefully, there's room for wildlife in these places.

What's in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan?

Goals: measures of what we want to achieve with wildlife and habitat conservation.

A Wildlife and Habitat 'Check-up': the size and condition of wildlife populations and natural areas and an evaluation of the problems affecting them. Scientists are evaluating Illinois' native plants, and will fold that information into the Action Plan so it covers all of the biological resources cared for by DNR.

Actions: grouped under the broad and overlapping topics of forests, streams, farmlands and prairies, wetlands, green cities, invasive species and land and water stewardship, these seven "campaigns" outline the steps to reach the goals.

Research and Monitoring: a compilation of the wildlife and habitat monitoring being done by many agencies, identification of the little-known wildlife and habitats and the problems where effective strategies are lacking.

Local Priorities: an analysis of the most important habitat types in each of the 15 natural divisions of Illinois (distinctive regions with similar geologic history and biological features), including regionally important game animals and sport fishes, unique sites with special significance to conserving rare wildlife or natural communities, and recreational, educational and economic opportunities related to wildlife and wild places.

(Photo by Tracy Evans)



Learn more about the plan

For a free, full-color copy of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, write to the Watershed Protection Section, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702, call (217)785-8266, or email jcross@dnrmail.state.il.us.

More information on the plan, and a link to download the 380-page technical document, can be found at: www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildliferesources/theplan.

For a CD copy of the full technical report, contact DNR at the number or address above.

The Action Plan fulfills our responsibility to protect wildlife and natural areas for future generations by looking ahead. Conserving and restoring natural places will ensure clean water for people and wildlife. Pollution and diseases affecting wildlife, like DDT and West Nile Virus, are often early indicators of problems that, if left unchecked, can affect people, too.

Conserving wildlife makes Illinois a better place to live. Walking in the woods, sitting alongside a stream or watching the birds in the backyard brings relaxation and balance to our hectic lives. Open space and natural areas enhance property values because people place a premium on green space and the natural scenery of trees, grasses, streams and lakes. Communities surrounded by abundant wildlife and healthy habitats reap other benefits as well, from nature-based tourism and

The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan is a long-term strategy for conserving natural areas for future generations.

wildlife associated recreation. Fishing and hunting pump more than \$2.5 billion into the state's economy each year. Non-consumptive activities, such as birdwatching and photography, generate another \$1.3 billion, supporting more than 13,000 jobs.

By focusing on wildlife and natural areas before problems become severe, the Action Plan is a cost-effective, long-term solution. Trying to recover endangered species is often a tangle of regulations and expensive efforts that are often too late to be effective.

Using the philosophy "keeping common species common," scientists, sportsmen, conservationists and members of the community worked together on the Action Plan, advocating creative and sensible solutions and incentives to help private land owners do the right things. The State Wildlife Grant Program, a relatively new source of additional federal funding for conserving non-game wildlife, provides some of the resources biologists need to implement these solutions.

The path outlined by the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan is not cheap or easy. But the alternatives—working without partners, without public partici-

Illinois' new action plan recognizes the importance of wildlife and wild places as family traditions.



pation and delaying action—will be more difficult and more expensive. Wildlife, and the places they live, are too important to us, our family traditions and future generations. They're worth the investment.



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(Photo by Jason A. Gould.)

